ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

WILLIAMS: Hello, I'm Ian Williams, sitting in for Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Many United Nations' Secretary-Generals have described the UN staff as "the Organization's most important asset". And yet, UN employees are under pressure. Budgets and staff numbers have been cut. Violence against UN staff in danger zones is on the rise. Have the cuts in personnel crippled the organization's ability to respond speedily to the increasing number of emergencies worldwide? Recently, a new President was elected of the United Nations Staff Union. Her objectives include restoring the credibility and respect for staff representatives, the creation of a harmonious relationship with and close collaboration with the UN staff around the world.

To talk about these and other issues affecting the thousands of staff who work for the UN, we have the President of the UN Staff Council, Mehri Madarshahi. Joining me to talk with Ms. Madarshahi is Tuyet Nguyen of the *German Press Agency/DPA* and John Metzler of *USA Radio Network*.

Ms. Madarshahi, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

MADARSHAHI: Thank you very much.

WILLIAMS: Of course you are well aware that UN staff are not the most popular people worldwide, deservedly or otherwise, and you have to contend with the old chestnut from a former Secretary-General, Mr. Perez de Cuellar, who once was asked how many staff worked for the UN and he said, " about half". It's a good joke. Is it more than a joke or how would you characterize the various stories about bloated waste and corruption at the United Nations?

MADARSHAHI: Well, actually, it's not that much of a joke because what the ex-Secretary-General said we are really at this point half. If you look at our number, in 1982 we were exactly 50 percent lower but in the course of the last few years, due to imposition of various reforms, the number in particular was reduced and along with it the institutional memory of the Organization was also reduced. But unfortunately, we have maintained the fame, which of course is a very, very unusual and very unjust thing, of bloated bureaucracy. To start with, the United Nations, its Secretariat in

particular, is one of the six main organs which was established by the Charter and we were supposed to have equal footing with Security Council and General Assembly, ECOSOC and the rest of them. But gradually, of course, changes in the meaning and the notion of the Secretariat brought us to the level of producing only reports and servicing only meetings and preparing some additional services to Member States. Now, naturally, any organizational entity which is only dealing with these issues is a bureaucracy and it's called a bureaucracy. Now if it is bloated bureaucracy that's something which I sincerely object to.

NGUYEN: The UN, being a bureaucracy like in any other organization, it's a bureaucracy. Reforms have been done in the past few years to really make it more effective. Do you think, the reduction by half, like you said from 1982, has the staff and the bureaucracy here been more effective?

MADARSHAHI: Unfortunately not and I am trying to be very frank and very undiplomatic to all of you. We have going through 29 reforms since 1946 and every Secretary-General and every head of this Organization, of course, has taken the pride of reforming this Organization one way or other. But to me these reforms have never been fundamentally actually touching the real essence of the issue. They have changed the boxes, they have created additional boxes, they have created additional or reduced some positions which have been considered by one Secretary-General important and by the other redundant.

NGUYEN: But just moving people around?

MADARSHAHI: Exactly. So you are not really changing fundamentally the Organization because it's just impossible. It's been created by the Charter for certain responsibilities and carrying out certain tasks so you cannot really do away with the Secretariat. What you do is just change the crust, you change the colour of the crust. You divide the pie into 8, 16, 24 and again you go back to 10, 12 and 14. So in essence you are not really changing anything. But unfortunately, the staff has been really the sacrificial lamb of this laboratory of reforms and each time because the staff is a number, number is the budget, budget is money and money is dollars, so any time you are reducing the number of posts, you can show a saving. But I have always maintained there is a difference between effectiveness and efficiency. We are probably more efficient because we are reducing our budget. We have less amount to spend,

we have less posts to support but we are not more effective.

NGUYEN: You don't produce quality work? That's what you said, no?

MADARSHAHI: If you are expecting a lesser number of people to do more work naturally the quality of work is not as credible as before.

NGUYEN: So how is the morale now after all these reforms and you know, boasting about it by many Secretary-Generals?

MADARSHAHI: Well, the morale is something that always surprises me because in any other organization which has gone through as many uncertainties and as much uncertainties as the UN, you could see the human resources of those particular organizations they are suffering from a much less level of enthusiasm than the UN does. To me, the surprising factor is the UN staff, regardless of what they have done to them, how much they have been undermined by the press, by the media, by even various bureaucrats, still they have maintained, in essence, their conviction that they are working in an organization which is humanitarian, an organization which respect rules of law and it's an organization which should also command the respect of the world community.

METZLER: Well, they keep speaking about reform as almost a mantra for the Secretary-General. It's always said here that reform is not an event but a process and at the end of the day this process then has really cut to the bone. How then do you cope, practically speaking, on a day-to-day event?

MADARSHAHI: You're absolutely correct. I remember last year I wrote an article on events versus process. You know, the nature of the reform. And to us, of course, it was not very welcome news given the possibility that this event will be more eventful and on a daily basis we have to face the reality of more cuts and more austerity and less budget. But in essence I think the Secretary-General, during his last reform, managed to put forward certain ideas that he always had and I assume that in the light of what is happening in the world today we are going to talk about a completely different organization in the years to come. Don't forget that we are on the verge of the new millennium and the General Assembly now is dealing with the new millennium assembly and you're talking about a new agenda for the UN and a new role for the UN. So my hope is, with the staff participation which I am really hoping to pull forward as an equal partner with the administration, we will be able to introduce a different kind of

reform, more profound reform. Something which, as you say, does not cut any more to the bones but really create more mass on the bones and create a kind of posture where we could stand up and be proud. It's not an easy task. We have tried often to prevail with the administration. I have had a meeting with the Secretary-General during which we have tried to at least explain what is the new spirit of the new Staff Council and of course he has been very much welcoming to the idea, but in actual terms it has not yet been translated through the lines.

METZLER: But does your staff share your enthusiasm on this point?

MADARSHAHI: I should say that's a very difficult question. If you were asking me that question two weeks ago, I would have said," of course they do." But today I have to be a little more reserved about that. The staff wants a lot or they want their rights to be respected. They would like to see their acquired rights are not eroded and unfortunately at this point of time. as we can see, there's nothing there in the cards that we can go to the staff and say you have been promised job security. There is no such thing. I cannot go to the staff and I say, "there is going to be a reduction of fixed-term or short-term contracts and you are going to be respected as the true notion of an international civil service as it was created, as it was by the founding fathers, more or less, as the Organization was before". So when you don't go with this bag of goodies to the staff, naturally what is happening, you are creating a kind of uneasiness. I don't want to call it demoralized staff but they're not as enthusiastic about the issues as at least, personally, I am at this point of time.

WILLIAMS: You haven't quite.... There's been 20 or 30 years of cuts and the few people who have actually been affected are not your members because it is the people who haven't been recruited on permanent contracts, because I understand the age profile of your membership is very high. It's almost approaching -- it's an average age of almost 50, I think, which means shortly into the new millennium, none of your existing members on permanent contracts will be here. What can an association representing the staff look forward and try to recruit younger people to the United Nations and give it a new and sort of healthy outlook less conditioned by approaching pensionhood?

MADARSHAHI: You approach a number of issues which you lump them together so eloquently. And if I want to really open the package and deal with every

individual issue that will take us much longer than the livelihood or the life of this particular programme. But let me touch on the issue of the age. Yes, the Organization is aging. By the year 2005, close to 50 percent of the staff of the Organization will be retired and in some departments that is going to create an enormous institutional memory problem -- enormous gaps -- because even if you start hiring junior professionals at this level, by the time that they build that kind of expertise which is really required to carry on the various function of this Organization, you're really talking about another 10 to 15 years. So there is a void in between which has to be dealt with. Our main actually ideas in the Staff Council is to start with, to have a kind of human resources forecasting and planning for at least the next 10 years, determine the need of the Organization first and accordingly plan what kind of staff do we need. Not necessarily bringing in everybody based on geographic distribution and based on gender and based on various criterias which has been established by the General Assembly, but we should really see where we are going in this Organization, what role this Organization is going to play in the millennium assembly, accordingly what kind of staff and expertise we should hire. Now to do that you have to have a competitive environment. The UN is no longer the highest and the best paid organization as it was originally thought. We have a lot of competition from the private sectors and also from various governments, which I don't want to name, in Europe. Since 1974, our base salary has not been revised despite a variety of factors which is involved with that. So today this Organization, not being competitive with the rest of the world, cannot attract the best qualified people. So this is what we are very worried about -- the future. And given the fact of this 50 percent vacancies in the year to come, if you do not manage to attract young, highly qualified people to start with, to bring in from outside, so then we don't really know what is going to happen in the near future.

WILLIAMS: This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Mehri Madarshahi, President of the UN Staff Council.

NGUYEN: Mehri, can you talk a little bit about the staff here? How many professionals do you have, how many in General Service, like you call it, and how did you organize yourself? Is it the kind of union that exists in the labour market around the world or is this something that exists only in the UN system?

MADARSHAHI: As far as the number is concerned, this is partly also

referring to what Ian said, I said I have to unravel your package. The number has been changed tremendously. From 1996 until now, we have lost a thousand posts, which the majority of them by the way have been permanent contract holders, contrary to what we are being given to understand that they are fixed-term contracts. No. Most of the people that have left, they have left around the age of between 50 to 55 and these are people that have been in the Organization for at least 20 to 30 years now and they enjoyed having a permanent contract. As far as the number today is concerned, we're talking anywhere between 8,500 to 8,700 staff in New York. I'm talking about this Secretariat. When you're talking about the Secretariat you should take into account that the staff worldwide might be different but we're talking about those against the regular budget of the United Nations. It's in and around 8,500 to 8,700. Out of that, we have close to 35 percent, if I am not wrong because I don't have this information at my fingertip, are professional and the rest General Service and related categories which is Security Officers, in the Third Basement printers and distributors and manual workers and so on and so forth. So I don't recall exactly your second question.

NGUYEN: Do the staff pay what we call union dues?

MADARSHAHI: Yes.

NGUYEN: And like you, for example, as President, where do you draw your salary from? Is this paid by the staff or is it from your salary as a UN employee?

MADARSHAHI: We have a completely different notion of a so-called union. I would rather call it an association or a council or gathering of various representatives than union in a notion which is very much known in the West. We are a country within a country. The United Nations does not exist anywhere on the map of the world. Outside of the four walls of the UN we are no longer neither American nor French nor any other nationality. We are UN employees, international civil servants, and with all the accolades. Now the Union as such does not necessarily then work based on the rules which are being established by international labour unions. The Secretary-General, based on General Assembly decisions, second or finance a post as the president of the union from available posts. That means I come with my post from my department given to the association for a period of a year or two, whereby I act as a president of the Union. And the rest of the membership, they are each representing anywhere between 150 to 200 people, they're being elected by their own localities which is part of the

United Nations Secretariat. At this point, we have about 60 units which represent all these 8,000 to 8,500 ....

WILLIAMS: Are these like shop stewards?

MADARSHAHI: They are. And we meet on a weekly basis. We decide about the prevailing issues, we discuss about where to go and then I have the honour to deal with the Secretary-General or Deputy Secretary-General in providing resolution to this.

NGUYEN: So whenever you get elected to represent the staff then you have to stop your own work? You work for the staff but are also paid by the UN.

MADARSHAHI: Exactly.

NGUYEN: I heard that governments have complained about this system because the salary that goes to you is not spent on producing the work of the UN but on doing the work for the staff. Is this a fair complaint?

MADARSHAHI: No. As a matter of fact I met with the European Union about two months ago and this question came about. The answer was very simple. We are not, as I mentioned we are not a union in the true sense of the word. We are an association of representatives of various units which are trying, to the extent possible, to deal with the problem at the bottom before it gets up. As Ian mentioned, my three objectives when I took over this office was, one of them at least, was to sit as an equal partner with the administration and talk about the issues which have been lingering for years in this Organization and have not been resolved. We have an enormous department which is dealing with the administration and management of the staff and the main function of this department is exactly dealing with those issues that we are dealing with from the staff side. So if you manage to come up with a resolution of this problem at this level this problem will create less difficulties for the administration, less time consumption for the General Assembly and, as a result, it is a truer partnership between the staff, the member states and the administration to be able to run the Secretariat better. So the General Assembly has considered this particular function essential in order to ensure that the voices of the staff are heard on an equal footing.

METZLER: Mehri, do you find that most of the UN's member states in fact are supportive of the Staff Council or in fact do some of them regard it as almost superfluous as I've heard amongst delegates on occasion?

MADARSHAHI: I can tell you, at least as of the time that I have taken over which is from 24 January until now -- a very young administration and I should say I still enjoy the honeymoon with both member states, administration and staff -- I have had a wonderful relationship with most member states. As I mentioned, the European Union for the first time ever invited us to their informal meetings and we were with them about two hours and forty five minutes discussing about a variety of issues of concern to them and to us. Immediately after that, the Group of 77, which as you know consists of 134 countries in the UN, they invited us and then we were called in to the informal of the Fifth Committee, which is the committee dealing with administration and budgetary issues of the UN and the General Assembly, and we were invited there and for informal consultation. We brought to their attention a variety of difficulties that the staff is facing and encountering at this point and I was very pleased to see the latest resolution of the General Assembly, which is Resolution 221 on the personnel issue, reflects at least close to 80 percent of what we wanted.

METZLER: So there's a harmonious relationship?

MADARSHAHI: Very much so, yes.

WILLIAMS: One of the many Secretary-Generals of the UN over the years have complained that in fact there's a far too harmonious relationship between Member states and some of the staff. That they spend a lot of their time receiving ambassadors who are lobbying for promotion, vacancies, opportunities for their nationals and in fact the ambassadors, the permanent ambassadors to the United Nations, are functioning more like shop stewards for their nationals than your Union does. Do you think this is counter-productive in terms of efficiency and harmony?

MADARSHAHI: I don't think so. At least as far as I am personally concerned, the more harmonious the relationship we develop with the member states, the better off the Secretariat is. What is the Secretariat without the staff? We are the Secretariat. So therefore, if we manage to see eye to eye with our Member states -- they are after all the master of ceremony, they pay our salary, so we owe them service. We have to more or less convince them that the money that they spend is being well - spent and for that reason the better relationship that we have with them, the better off we are, the Secretariat is, the Secretary-General is. I understand the...

WILLIAMS: What I am asking is, should they be interfering directly in promotion

and appointments?

MADARSHAHI: Don't forget that... I don't want to prescribe anything at this point but the Organization consists of 185 nationalities. We are supposed to be all independent international civil servants. The moment that you join the Organization you're supposed to denounce any kind of linkages with your government and you should look at every Member State equally with the same kind of treatment but you cannot say that you ignore them, right? They exist, you have to respect them and you have to deal with them. Now, of course, it is a matter of fact that our system of career is very clearly divided between career staff and those that come through diplomatic channels. At the level of ASG or USG you don't have this kind of career that a person at the P-2 can always become USG and ASG. These are the posts that are the prerogative of Member states. It shouldn't be, but it is. At this point of time this is a fact of life. Now they interfere or intervene, I don't know which one should I use as a terminology, but I think they are keeping abreast of the developments or availability of posts in the Secretariat.

NGUYEN: Mehri, do you think the media in general understand the role of what you call the international civil service?

MADARSHAHI: At least most of them know and this is quite unfortunate. I have on one or two occasions managed to talk to some of your colleagues and ended up to explain to them how deprived one feels as international civil servants. We have no nationality, we have no country, we have to denounce it as international civil servant. We have no way to claim tax or if we buy a house we can't get a mortgage or we have no access to any kind of facilities that a member of a state, be it the United States or otherwise, will benefit from. After 10 years, 20 years, 30 years you work in this Organization, when you retire it's a sad fact of life that you don't know where you're going. You're cut off completely from your roots. You have not rooted anywhere else. Your entire life has been the United Nations and you have become an animal which is within this more or less framework. You have lived, you have married, you have your family and you die and you become such a generalist more or less, knowing everything and knowing nothing so that you are unable to find other work somewhere else. So this is unfortunately, as you say, the negative aspect of being an international civil service. There are thousands of positive points that I can also talk to you about.

METZLER: Accentuating the positive, what is your committee or staff presently doing to work here at Headquarters in the building itself? We spoke about the age of staff, we also see that the building is nearly 50 years old and has lots of problems with poor ventilation, bad air, asbestos and what-have-you. What sort of things like that are you doing in the physical plant at Headquarters to make it better on a day-to- day basis for staff?

WILLIAMS: Briefly?

MADARSHAHI: Yes. I didn't get the signal, sorry. They have major problems with the environmental problem here . As it has been estimated, 2.5 billion dollars is required in order to refurbish this building. We have asbestos, we have electromagnetic field, we have a variety of ventilation problems. We have bad air, we have airborne bacteria, you name it, we have it. There is a committee which is being established to looking very seriously into that. We're hiring consultants and, hopefully, in the course of the next few days we will be able to do a testing to see how bad the whole thing is.

WILLIAMS: Thank you. Ms. Madarshahi, that's all the time we have. Thank you very much for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.** Our guest has been Mehri Madarshahi, President of the UN Staff Council. She was interviewed by Tuyet Nguyen of the *German Press Agency/DPA* and John Metzler of *USA Radio Network*. I'm Ian Williams, sitting in for Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**